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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT'S HAIRLINE FRACTURES

REF: A. 07 DAMASCUS 01156
[1](#)B. 07 DAMASCUS 01170
[1](#)C. 08 DAMASCUS 00757
[1](#)D. 08 DAMASCUS 00842
[1](#)E. DAMASCUS 00747

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The SARG's two-year crackdown on civil society activists, especially the Damascus Declaration's leadership (ref C), may be on the verge of producing the first serious structural fragmentation in the opposition movement. Hasan Abdul Azim told us on November 9 that he would convoke the "Democratic National Rally" for the first time since 2005. The "Rally," which formed in 1979, has not met since it became a signatory to the Damascus Declaration and willingly subsumed its political energies within the larger democratic reform movement. Azim, who leads the Arab Socialist Union Party, confided that his relationship to the Damascus Declaration had now reached "a dead end." Other contacts report, however, that the relationship effectively stopped in 2007 when Azim failed to gain a leadership role in the movement's General Secretariat. Convening the Rally would establish a degree of political independence for Azim and his allies and, potentially, weaken the Declaration's unity. End Summary.

Questions over Damascus Declaration's Future

[1](#)2. (C) Azim's sentiments about the Damascus Declaration echo concerns of other senior dissident figures like Aref Dalila and Michel Kilo (reftels D and E, respectively), who have both expressed degrees of skepticism about the group's future viability. The difference, however, is that Azim seems to be retreating to a more conservative, regime-friendly position -- Azim and the Arab Socialist Union Party (ASU) enjoyed a quasi-legal status with the SARG prior to 2005. The other five constituent parties of the Democratic National Rally are the Communist Action Party, the Workers Revolutionary Party, the Democratic Ba'ath Party, the Arab Socialist Movement, and the People's Democratic Party, which is led by Riad al-Turk.

A Foot in Both Camps

[1](#)3. (C) The already uneasy relationship between Azim's ASU and the Damascus Declaration seriously chilled in 2007 when Azim

stood for election to the chairmanship of Declaration's General Secretariat and failed by a single vote to win a position (ref A). This loss, Damascus Declaration member Fawaz Tello (strictly protect) speculated in a November 13 meeting, led Azim and his party to "freeze participation" in the Damascus Declaration.

¶4. (C) According to Tello, Azim and the ASU had always kept one foot in the reform camp and "one foot with the regime." Following the SARG's December 2007 arrests of dozens of Damascus Declaration members (ref B), the ASU released a statement denouncing U.S. policies in the region and touting a brand of Arab nationalism that alienated members of the Kurdish opposition and moderate Islamists. Tello noted this created a safer political space for the ASU membership. "They have never sacrificed anything, even in the beginning," Tello said of the ASU. "While other members of the Rally, like Riad Turk, were paying a heavy price, the ASU paid nothing." For the last two years, Azim has reportedly tried, but failed, to form an alternative political reform group.

¶5. (C) The failure to find a viable alternative to the Damascus Declaration may have prompted Azim to try reconvening the Rally. Tello argued that whatever Azim's plans were, he would have to execute them before the incarcerated Damascus Declaration members were released from prison and brought new publicity and energy to the stalled movement. In an aside, Tello reported that the incarcerated human rights lawyer Haitham al-Maleh was displeased with how Azim was handling his case and had decided to drop him from the legal team. Tello intimated that Azim, as a lawyer, was too concerned with not upsetting security to provide the kind of reliable and aggressive counsel Maleh's case demanded.

¶6. (C) Comment: If Azim does manage to convene the Democratic National Rally, it will weaken the Damascus Declaration's limited public profile, but will not bury it. The more probable outcome of any convention would be that Azim could, for a time, raise a moderate, reform-minded, regime-friendly face and assert his group to be the only practicable route to political and economic reform. The SARG would probably accept the quasi-critical presence of such a group and even use it to polish its tarnished public image on civil rights. Even though Riad al-Turk's party is part of the original Rally, we suspect Turk would disavow any attempts to break from the Damascus Declaration.

HUNTER